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PUBLIC HEALTH REPORTS

VOL. XXVIII.

MAY 23, 1913.

No. 21.

SOIL POLLUTION.

THE CHAIN GANG AS A POSSIBLE DISSEMINATOR OF INTESTINAL PARASITES AND INFECTIONS.

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The civilization and refinement of any community may be judged from a number of different points of view, one of which is the method it follows in handling its convicts—men and women who are so absolutely in its power that they are unable to protect themselves.

If a given community subjects its convicts to conditions that result in the possibility of spreading disease, unnecessarily, either among the criminals themselves or among the community in which they are being held in confinement, a question may legitimately arise as to the progress that community has made in the onward march of refinement and civilization.

During the past 20 years I have had a number of opportunities to observe prisoners in penitentiaries, prison farms, jails, and chain gangs, and have been seriously impressed with the average lack of cleanliness among the criminals and their guards, although the opportunities for rigid discipline rendered it possible to make these penal institutions admirable schools in which the State might easily give to its charges some good lessons in cleanliness, hygiene, and sanitation. With few exceptions the authorities not only failed to see and to utilize the opportunity offered, but they actually permitted things to occur which were dangerous to the communities. Two examples of "chain gangs" recently (1912) visited will suffice to bring out the points in question.

In the county of X there was a chain gang of about 20 negroes working on the road. At night the men were huddled together in a cage, the only protection for which was a small tree. There were mattresses for less than half of the men, and the others had only thin blankets as beds. When the negroes returned from work they were huddled together in the cage, in which, according to the statement of the men and the keeper, they not only slept, but they also ate. Buckets without covers or disinfectants were placed in the cage for use in urinating and defecating. The excreta were carried to a small stream

into which the material was thrown. The kitchen was near the cage and at the time of my visit was swarming with flies.

The guards—five white men—occupied a small house close by. There was no privy either for them or for the several “trusties” who were not in the cage. Soil pollution was practiced back of the camp and ample opportunity was present for the spread of fecal material to the food both of the guards and of the convicts.

The washing facilities consisted of a tub which was filled with water and in which all the prisoners washed.

The less said about the food the better, especially since this short article is not supposed to deal with that side of the question.

The county of Y boasts of what is said to be one of the best jails and convict camps in the State. The jail possibly deserves its reputation. The camp has some good features and is far superior to the camp of the county of X. The kitchen was swarming with flies. According to statements made by the “trusties,” they and the guards went to the woods near by to defecate. Most of the men were working down the road some distance, close to a house occupied by a white family. Out of respect to the women and children in this household, a temporary cloth privy was erected for the convicts. Be it said to the credit of both the white and the negro prisoners, this privy was used by them. There was, however, no pail in the privy. The men defecated on the ground and made a pretense of covering the excreta with dirt; part of it was in fact covered, part was trampled down by the prisoners’ shoes, part was carried away on the prisoners’ shoes, part was being carried by flies to the near-by house to be devoured in the food by the white family living there.

Here we have two institutions (and there are many others equally bad) under the direction of the civil authorities of supposed civilized communities; in these institutions discipline is enforced but the prisoners are not only permitted but compelled to live under conditions of filth that are ideal for the spread of soil-pollution diseases. It is not necessary to prove that disease exists among the prisoners observed, or that cases of disease have actually spread from these camps to families in these localities. It is sufficient to show that the civil authorities in question (in a State where the State board of health is making heroic efforts to suppress soil pollution and soil-pollution diseases) are not only setting a very poor example to the people, but are actually feeding their convicts upon their own excreta and are at the same time feeding the convict guards and nearby families upon the same condiment.

What an encouragement this to public health officers who are fighting against the spread of disease; what a commentary upon the regard the authorities in question have for the health of the women and children under their protection; what an example of refinement and twentieth century civilization!